

Orange County Dept. of Education



28
school
districts

422,300+
students

District to 88% in Santa Ana Unified
School District.¹

Vision

Orange County students will lead the nation in college and career readiness and success.

Background

The Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) serves 422,351 students in 28 school districts, representing the racially, culturally and socio-economically diverse cities and towns of Orange County. The free and reduced price meals (FRPM) percentage averages 54%, ranging from 14% in Los Alamitos Unified School

This profile focuses on OCDE's work to create greater alignment and coherence between Community Schools and California Multi-tiered System of Supports (CA MTSS). As the statewide lead for CA MTSS and a partner in the Southern Coast Regional Transformational Assistance Center (RTAC) for Community Schools, OCDE is well-positioned to help Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) better understand how these two widely implemented initiatives work together. This profile documents OCDE's efforts in Orange County, though its materials and perspectives have been shared statewide through conferences and networks.

^[1] [CDE Dataquest](#), 2025-26

Interviews

This profile is based on interviews with:

Stephanie Fernandez, OCDE, Community Schools Coordinator

Lupe Gomez, Santa Ana Unified School District, Director of Community Schools

Lara Kain, OCDE, Community Schools Administrator

Bao Nguyen, OCDE, Community Schools Coordinator

We are also grateful to Jami Parsons, Executive Director of Student Services and Programs at OCDE, and Christine Olmstead, Systems Design Strategist, who described the statewide work of CA MTSS in relation to Community Schools. While this broader work is referenced, this profile covers OCDE's efforts with LEAs in its county and region.

Strategies for Coherence

In OCDE's approach to coherence, the Community Schools strategy is deepening work that may already be happening in high performing schools. The key practices in the [Community Schools Forward Framework](#) describe levels of community engagement and ownership, for example, that go beyond what most schools are doing and are critical levers in the transformation of learning environments. The California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) offers funding and technical assistance to do this work intentionally and to scale these proven practices to many more schools across California. CA MTSS creates the tiered structure through which many of the key practices can be organized to meet students' varied needs and build on their assets. Both Community Schools and CA MTSS are explicit about the importance of having a co-created, shared vision for student success and using this vision to align district and school initiatives.

Moving beyond this theoretical connection, OCDE has designed and delivered actionable professional learning and tools to help LEAs implement Community Schools and CA MTSS in concert. OCDE's strategies for coherence include:



Capacity Building

- (1) Designing professional learning that intentionally connects Community Schools, CA MTSS, district/school planning processes and other initiatives
- (2) Developing tools and resources to make coherence visible



1. Designing professional learning that intentionally connects Community Schools, CA MTSS, district/school planning processes and other initiatives

This looks like...

- Sharing common strategies for professional learning that promote coherence
- Linking to existing processes for the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) and Differentiated Assistance (DA)

Community Schools and CA MTSS staff at OCDE often collaborate to develop and deliver professional learning for the region and conference presentations. A concrete example of shared work is a workshop series on leveraging CA MTSS and Community Schools to support English Learners and Long-Term English Learners in Orange County. As they work together, OCDE's Community Schools and CA MTSS staff **share common strategies for professional learning that promote coherence**. For instance, professional learning for both initiatives is grounded in the LEA's vision and encourages participants to consider the degree to which students, families and staff have contributed to that vision. OCDE has an organization- and county-wide focus on the use of street data, including trainings by Shane Safir, author of the book, Street Data. Funded by OCDE Community Schools, this work provides shared language across OCDE staff and its LEA partners, and builds understanding about the importance of listening to interest-holders whose voices are not always heard.

Across initiatives, OCDE's process also encourages participants to define their own goals for improvement, align them with the school or district goals, and identify the action steps to achieve those goals. On this improvement journey, participants are encouraged to identify and strengthen the programs and structures that are already happening, rather than starting from scratch. In OCDE's Community Schools Network Meeting, a bimonthly learning platform bringing together teams of school-level practitioners and district leaders from across the county, participants have time to explore how Community Schools can work with other initiatives to collaboratively improve learning conditions within their LEA. Participants receive concrete materials and resources to bring back to their colleagues and constituents so their work continues to be linked and moving in the same direction. Similarly, OCDE hosts an annual Joint Network Meeting where representatives from different initiatives share their work, including Family and Community Engagement (FACE), Early Education, Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO), McKinney Vento, among others.

Furthermore, OCDE's professional learning staff intentionally help participants **link to existing processes for the LCAP, SPSA and DA**. Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) participates in the Community Schools Network and appreciates the push to align overlapping LCAP and Community School processes like stakeholder engagement, data collection, and budget reviews. The stronger connection within SAUSD has allowed interest-holders - who haven't traditionally provided input in the LCAP process - to share their on-the-ground perspective and understand how the pieces fit together in the district's coherent whole. For districts in DA, OCDE encourages them to consider how the different initiatives - CA MTSS, Community Schools, FACE, ELO, for example - can contribute expertise, resources and strategies to help them improve.

Capacity Building



2. Developing tools and resources to make coherence visible

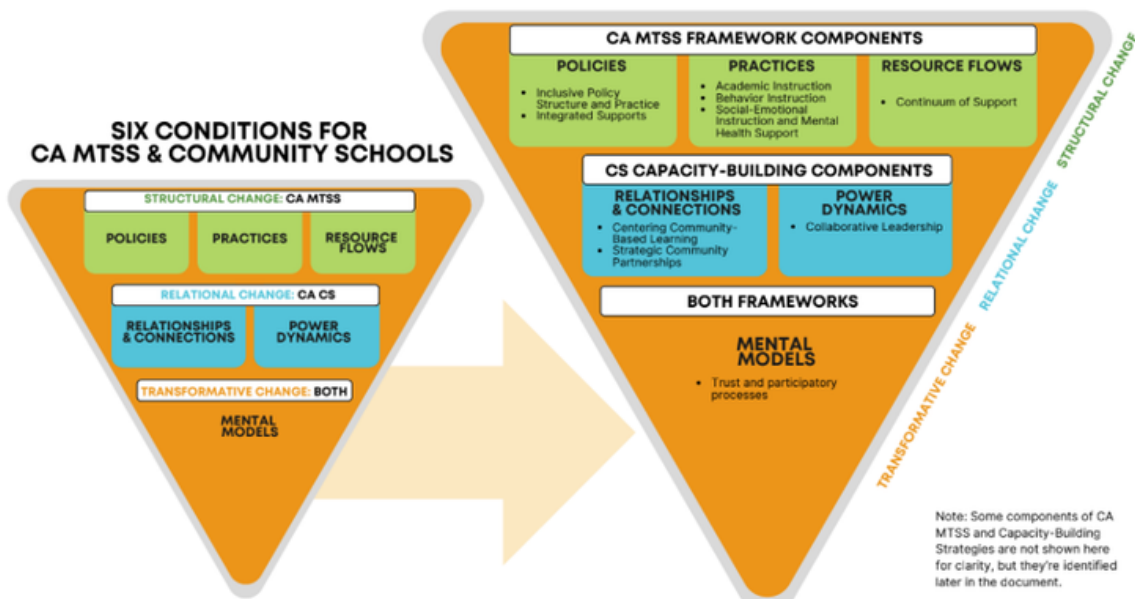
This looks like...

- Being explicit about how the Community Schools and CA MTSS frameworks work together
- Using tools and resources flexibly to meet the needs of the field

OCDE has created **a toolkit that is explicit about how the Community Schools and CA MTSS frameworks work together**. The toolkit is designed to help LEAs understand how the two frameworks can be seamlessly and simultaneously implemented as part of a school transformation process. Maximizing Impact: CA MTSS and Community Schools A Beginner's Toolkit includes multiple pieces designed to give participants options for how they engage with the rich material:

- The Crosswalk of the Frameworks (*see following page*) describes how the CA MTSS framework and the Community Schools Capacity Building strategies work together to meet the "Six Conditions for Systemic Change" described by John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge. OCDE's crosswalk shows how CA MTSS components hold the aspects of Structural Change, the Community Schools' Capacity Building Strategies address Relational Change and together they support Transformative Change.

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Crosswalk of Frameworks, CA MTSS & Community Schools: A Beginner's Resource

- Workshops for Beginners offers four one-hour sessions designed as turnkey materials that anyone can use to engage their staff and constituents in understanding how CA MTSS and Community Schools interact. The materials include a complete four-session slide deck with facilitator talking points.



Workshops for Beginners, CA MTSS & Community Schools

The Maximizing Impact Toolkit is a huge resource and is intended to be **used flexibly to meet the needs of the field**. Within OCDE professional learning, staff find themselves returning most frequently to the parts of the training in Session 3 about shifts in mental models required and supported by both the CA MTSS framework and Community Schools Capacity Building Strategies. It also provides examples and guidance about the participatory processes that facilitate mindset shifts. OCDE staff hope that LEAs and other facilitators of learning will lean into the aspects of the toolkit that they find most helpful and relevant.

Challenges

- **Leadership changes.** Sustaining a coherent and collaborative approach can be difficult, particularly when there are frequent changes in school, district and county office leadership.
- **Initiative fatigue is real.** People aren't sure where to start when they are bombarded with so many different opportunities and requirements.
- **There can be a grantwriter vs. implementer gap.** When LEAs apply for new initiatives, the person writing the grant is often different and disconnected from the people who will do the actual implementation.
- **Time is limited.** There's always the challenge of time, and the importance of slowing down to focus on quality in a few key priorities.

Impacts

The impact of OCDE's coherence efforts varies across its LEAs. Santa Ana Unified School District and Anaheim Union High School District have been doing an exemplary job, including shared visioning processes with multiple interest-holders that have created a clear north star to guide their work. These two districts are consistently communicating coherence through their actions.

Within OCDE, there are increasing examples of staff from different departments collaborating. Teams working on DA, for example, reach out to other initiatives so they can join in on DA conversations with districts. A Community Schools team member sits on the CA MTSS planning committee to co-design and co-present sessions in the region and at conferences.